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## The Dawn of Civilisation Introduced

Liz Stanley

### The project

On a number of occasions Olive Schreiner felt absolutely impelled to write something. From letters, three of her books clearly come under this heading. Her novel *From Man to Man* was written in the late 1870s or early 80s, then following a publisher's recommendations was precipitously unpicked, and thereafter she spent several concentrated periods trying to put it back together again. She cared deeply about its central concern with the different forms prostitution can take including in marriage and bitterly lamented her failure to complete it. The second is the allegorical novella *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*. This is a work of 'magic realism' concerned with Christian and Imperial hypocrisy concerning the later-1890s invasion, massacres and bloody conquest of this territory (now Zimbabwe) by troopers employed by the Rhodes-controlled Chartered Company. These were events of horror in themselves, even more so because of the long-term consequences Schreiner (correctly) perceived them as representing. It was quickly written in the moment and published at the time – and Rhodes made sure there were reprisals against her, as discussed in the introduction. The third is *The Dawn of Civilisation*.

Almost immediately it started, Schreiner perceived the Great War as a total or absolute war involving all aspects of a society and putting in motion changes which thereafter would be difficult or impossible to go back from. She was horrified by the cupidity and stupidity of diplomacy and government, appalled by the endless slaughter in the trenches, and deeply disturbed by how ordinary men and women behaved when licensed by notions of nationalism and patriotism. She was also led inexorably to the conclusion that women were as blood-thirsty and violent as men albeit with this taking complementary forms, and that humanity as a whole was far closer to its animalistic origins,

and the attractions of killing much closer to the surface, than she had previously supposed. Over the war years, the book she was writing about this is alluded to both indirectly and directly many times, and with increasing frustration because ill-health prevented its completion.

In the main Schreiner's letters do not discuss her writing either at all, or if it is mentioned then this is just in an in-passing way, so the absence of mentions of this book by name until early-1916 should not be taken to indicate that this was when it was started and not before. Her ingrained writing practice was to think about something in her mind and repeatedly rehearse it until its overall shape was fully formed before she committed anything to paper; and its gestation period is likely to include the opening stages of the war when massive numbers of people move around, ports were closed, passports were introduced, as well as the swiftness with which belligerency and nationalist fervour entered everyday life and relationships, and then the horrifying casualties of trench warfare. While Schreiner's shorter war-time writings show that the introduction of conscription and its removal of an individual's right to decide whether they fought and killed or not was something she cared a great deal about and actively opposed, this was not until the start of 1916. But her revulsion about the war and its many iniquities existed from the start and preoccupied her, as her letters amply show. They also show that by mid-1915 Schreiner was writing hard at the 'little book', when she first stayed with a young South African connection, May Murray Parker and her husband Freddie, in Llandrindod Wells.

It is clear why the planned book was embarked on but not completed. Before Olive Schreiner left South Africa at the end of 1913, her heart problems had become seriously incapacitating. Treatment at a spa in Nauheim in Germany, which she shared with her brother Will, also suffering from the same heart condition, had been restorative. War-time privations, polluted air and dampness then took their toll. Spending two extended periods living in the clean air of Llandudno Wells during the drier months of 1915 and 1916 restored some of Schreiner's energies and led to a burst of creativity that produced nearly all the work in this compilation of her wartime writings. Between whiles and back in polluted foggy London, and suffering kidney stones, influenza and pneumonia, asthma and the worsening of her heart problems, although she sporadically worked on *The Dawn of Civilisation* she was not able to finish it.

The remaining traces show signs of there having been, probably at different times in her work on it, somewhat different structures to Schreiner's planned book, one consisting of seven sections, and the other, which seems to be later, of three sections. The typescripts in the National Library of South Africa collection are of the first three sections of the projected book, with a title-page showing contents numbered 1 to 7, but with titles given just for 1. 'Introduction', 2. 'Somewhere, some time, some place', and 3. 'The causes of war'. The longer manuscripts in the Harry Ransom Centre Collection suggest a structure of an Introduction, then three sections called 'Somewhere, some time, some place', 'The causes of war', and 'Remedies for war'. This latter in fact largely corresponds to what remains. It has been followed in present editorial work because this appears to be what Olive Schreiner ended by trying to do. From a more complicated starting-point, the project became one of writing a book that introduced the topic and its importance, presented the iniquities of war and the possibility of a better society, explored its causes, and indicated the grounds for producing the 'somewhere' of the far future in which remedies would have been found.

What results from bringing the NLSA and HRC sources together is a text of around 22,000 words and equivalent in size to the shorter polemical books Schreiner produced earlier in her writing life, such as *An English South African's View of the Situation*, an anti-war polemic published on the eve of the South African War. It is in fact a new, previously unpublished, Olive Schreiner book. It is moreover an Olive Schreiner book that no one has realised until now that she had in fact managed to produce, albeit with ragged ends. It is on those most important of subjects, war and peace and the human propensity to engage in one but only half-heartedly embrace the other.

Why has this not been realised before and *The Dawn of Civilisation* reassembled sooner? There are a number of reasons. There has been a tacit assumption that the short essay edited by Cronwright-Schreiner was all that existed. Few Schreiner scholars have worked across all of Olive Schreiner's remaining manuscripts, with instead most attention given to her published literary works and the secondary literature on them. Of course there have been exceptions to this, most notably Joyce Berkman (1989), whose *The Healing Imagination of Olive Schreiner* emphasised the potential importance of *The Dawn of Civilisation* in understanding the entire Schreiner corpus and encouraged my own investigations of the manuscript sources. What is perhaps surprising is that Berkman's view

of the importance of *The Dawn of Civilisation* and my efforts in this direction in an earlier book on Schreiner's work, *Imperialism, Labour & the New Woman*, did not noticeably help kick-start work on retrieving the last project that Schreiner had been engaged in. The explanation is of course that such things require a chorus of activity rather than individual voices and this has come into existence only relatively recently.

In important part this has developed through the expansion of feminist scholarship across the board as well as of Schreiner scholarship in particular. In part it has also been due to intellectual changes and developments which have given greater attention to messy texts and recognised that avant-textes – the notes and drafts and work-in-progress of writing – are important and interesting. It is in this framework of feminist research, and earlier texts to those that have been published, that my own work here has come about. In particular, it connects with the project of publishing the entirety of Olive Schreiner's letters in genetic 'bird in flight' transcriptions which show all her deletions, insertions, amendments and mistakes. Relatedly, a number of genetic transcriptions or avant-textes of key Schreiner work have also been produced and are available via the 'Manuscripts' pages of the *Olive Schreiner Letters Online*, and these will continue being added to (<https://www.oliveschreiner.org/>). In this respect, the apparent disarray and messiness of what remains of *The Dawn of Civilisation* has been no bar; it has been more a matter of time and in what order to carry out work on the many extant traces of Schreiner's writing. It has also of course involved making decisions about how to approach editing and presenting the resulting text, discussed in a technical note below.

### **What *The Dawn...* is about**

The Introduction begins with a very direct address to the reader by the author in explaining why personal address is important. The 'personal element' is intentional, it insists, because it is only through simple direct statements that the reality of an absolute conscientious objection to war can be put across. It emphasises that it is necessary to do this because some people assume it is not real but instead a kind of front for simply not wanting to fight in the war. It sets the scene, that this is between the writer and the reader, and the writer is conveying something both very personal and deeply meaningful.

Section 1 starts with Schreiner describing in detail her childhood epiphany with regards to force and bloodshed, with the amount of narrative detail provided conveying how real it was for her that the almost routine levels of war, violence, killing, express towards animals as well as to people, are both appalling and also mismatched against the glories of the world. It also insists that something can be done, and that it is not nothing although it might be limited. Wars cannot be stopped by people as individuals, nor even routine levels of violence. But – and it is a major ‘but’ – there are areas of life where action can be effectively taken by individual people. This is put across in her rousing statements about those aspects of life where we are in effect ‘as god’, in having the complete capacity to act as we want. Act in ways that entirely rule out violence and warfare, and ‘in that one, small, minute, almost infinitesimal spot in the Universe, where your will rules, there, where alone you are as god, *strive* to make that you hunger for real!’.

The epiphany that discussion in Section 1 starts with and what it led her to regarding where ‘your will rules’, is to live out the principles that inhere in this position. It is emphasised as having stayed with her for all the years thereafter. And as the discussion points out, these had included years in which a bitter war had been fought in South Africa and confirmed her thinking. Acting according to these principles is seen in terms of a struggle against the ‘primitive self-seeking instincts in human nature’; and while at the time of her childhood epiphany this was based on feelings about violence and bloodshed on the one hand and the beauties of the world on the other, now at the point she is writing reason adds further grounds to understanding this conundrum.

The causes of war and how to understand them are the focus of discussion in Section 2. Some people see more as having structural Origins and being a product of particular kinds of social organisation. However, the absence of evidence to support this view is underlined, pointing out that warfare occurs in all forms of social organisation. Some other people see war as being caused by key individuals like Bonaparte and others, but this is seen as ignoring the fact that such people could never achieve a state of war on their own, it is more complex than this. And although there is in addition a plausible argument that wars are fought to secure material gain, this is not a sufficient factor in explaining their occurrence. In reality, that there are actually losses all round is pointed out with detailed examples and

discussion, including reference to the work of Norman Angell. Some individuals may gain, but the vast majority do not and nor do either the victors or the defeated belligerent countries.

But at the same time, the discussion in Section 2 emphasises that mankind not governed by reason, and that what underpins such arguments is the existence of 'primitive instincts and passions and unreasoned habits', which are 'deeply embedded in human nature'. Perhaps the most important of these in understanding the causes of war is the love of physical contest, which for Schreiner exists equally in males and females, covered over by just a thin veneer 'of what we call civilisation'.

Considering the remedies for war is the concern of Section 3. Many people have proposed palliatives to the most crude and extreme forms of warfare but these do not get at the root of why it happens. And getting to the root requires further inquiry as to how and why it is so rooted in human conduct. Warfare is not sporadic or abnormal in the sense of being atypical. It is one of the oldest, most basic aspects of society in that it comes out of the primeval and instinctual. Its causes are 'not in this or that...', but something more general and shared. This is explained narratively in describing in a very down-to-earth way an encounter between two small boys. Discounting ideas about material gain, it is the more 'irrational' factors concerning a different form gain, the gain over others, which is described as 'top-dogism' and an unattractive characteristic lurking in us all.

This is also depicted as 'the passion for dominance, power and glory', and is found all branches of life, although most prominently in war, with the rest of Section 3 exploring this in some detail. It is this desire for dominance that is used to rouse war-fever in people and which hurls them on in the heat of the moment and it is accompanied by a delight in shedding blood, destruction and death. Schreiner's argument goes on that first may be experienced directly by those gripped by war-fever in fighting. It is also experienced indirectly and in abstract, with those not actually involved in fighting themselves nonetheless experiencing vicarious excitement and enjoyment from others doing so. This can occur in the most unlikely of people, and such feelings can be worked up deliberately, with a range of examples given. Although women are seemingly outside of such feelings, as many are mothers and protective towards their children even when adult, nonetheless all

women in practice experience the same kind of feelings as men although often 'somewhat disguised in complementary form'.

A key example that Section 3 discusses in detail concerns the vicarious thrill that can exist when war-fever is aroused, and it turns on attraction, desire and pleasure. The clothes and ornaments associated with military forces are a focus of attraction because of the suggestion of 'bloodshed and force' associated with them, and which is express towards men of the opposite side too. Schreiner describes this as something 'distinctively sexual', involving sexual excitement and promiscuity, with these sexual responses being as marked in some females as males. Most controversially, she sees some women as more likely to express such feelings, with the unfortunate implication that the impetus comes from celibacy, from thwarted sexual feeling.

Section 3 also discusses other factors making for war. It sees hatred as another element in human nature that contributes, for when dominated by it, people or nations lose all reason and violate basic standard of humanity and justice. The frenzy of hatred is described as being akin to madness because it can be joined to war-fever and to become uncontrollable. Without such hatred, the realisation of rational thought would stop war. Fear is another emotion in human nature making for war, where base actions are stimulated by such feelings. When people are dominated by fear, all principles go by the board, even in relation to those who are very close to us; it can lead people into depths of behaviour about not even hatred would have led them to. It is also the most infectious of human emotions in its 'its electric power of transmitting itself'. However, as the final sentences acknowledge, there but for grace we all go.

There is no demarcated end provided in the shape of an overall summary of the arguments made about causes and remedies for war. Clearly in this short book Schreiner is concerned with the achievement of, not only peace, but also the equal and just society that she associates with a peace that is more than just the cessation of war. The practicalities she comments on are clearly closely related to her perception of the ingrained and fundamental character of the causes, that these lie within the individual as well as collective propensity to experience 'the desire for vulgar dominance and empire, which has ensnared us all' and therefore will require every individual to make decisions about those aspects of their conduct 'where you are as god'. When *The Dawn of Civilisation* was being worked on, she



was writing in the eye of the storm. In spite of this, perhaps in a way because of it, a number of respects and outside of its pages, she demonstrated an unusual ability to look forwards to what was to come 'after'. Total war, the failure of the League of Nations, another even more devastating and more total war, downward spiralling economies, severe unrest in many countries, are among the things she comments on. The contents of Parts Two and Three will give some flavour of what a finished book might have been like.

### **How the text has been editorially produced**

The first section of *The Dawn of Civilisation* has been relatively straightforward to reach editorial decisions on. A number of typescripts are in the NLSA collections, all having been edited albeit in different ways by Olive Schreiner herself, and there is also the published version edited by Cronwright-Schreiner. Working from the typewritten top-copy as a base, as many of Schreiner's editorial amendments on the other typescripts have been used as possible without this disturbing the sense of the base. This has produced the Introduction and Section 1 'Somewhere, some time, some place', which approximate to what Cronwright-Schreiner published. However, there are differences.

Cronwright-Schreiner was a great fan of commas and used them profusely; he did not like Olive Schreiner's conversational and in some respects informal way of writing and frequently 'corrected' this to what he thought grammatically more correct and formal; and he misunderstood the sense of some sentences and changed them. The result is that what is in this present book, although composed by the same materials, is different from what appeared in 1921 in *The Nation and the Athenaeum*. This is in low-key ways, as none of the changes by Cronwright-Schreiner are in themselves major, although the cumulative effect gives a significantly different feel to what results.

The previously unknown Sections 2 and 3 of *The Dawn of Civilisation* have been produced from two handwritten manuscripts in the HRC collections and have been editorially much more challenging to work on. Their contents have never appeared before in any form. These two manuscripts are not in Olive Schreiner's handwriting but have been produced by an 'unknown hand' most likely to be that of Walter Purcell; and from written responses to his work, he was seen by Cronwright-Schreiner as an accurate transcriber of

Olive Schreiner's messy manuscript. Many of the suggested amendments marked on these HRC manuscripts as by 'WP' have been drawn on, while the interventions by Cronwright-Schreiner have sometimes been followed but mainly not. WP was endeavouring to produce a manuscript that accurately represented Schreiner's but was more legible, while Cronwright-Schreiner was concerned more with making her write 'properly' in the terms he interpreted this. Such things have been made use of only where appropriate.

The shorter HRC manuscript in Folder 3 is about a quarter the size of the longer manuscript in Folder 4. Most of it is concerned with the causes of war and it has been given this title, which appears in the NLSA list of contents but with no corresponding content there, as constituting what was intended to be Section 2 of Schreiner's book. Also a small amount of the Folder 3 'Causes' content has been incorporated in the Folder 4 'Remedies' discussion of its Section 3, placed at a point where it clearly directly extends the flow of the argument, with this indicated in explanatory footnotes. There is also a small degree of overlap between these two manuscripts, mainly noticeable in some sentences on the economic aspects of war as seen by Norman Angell, although the large majority of content is quite distinct.

What follows is, as noted earlier, a 'readable' text, one in which Olive Schreiner's amendments been incorporated and decisions judiciously made about interventions by Cronwright-Schreiner and those helping him. However, part of the text relies on a transcription made by one of these people, and it contains at various points a number of spaces left for words in Schreiner's original that could not be made out. There have necessarily been preserved and appear in the text as [word space], as there is no information as to what she might have intended beyond the context of the particular sentences concerned.

While *The Dawn of Civilisation* which now follows is not exactly as Olive Schreiner might *ideally* have wanted it, it is as close as possible to what she *actually* produced. And what she actually produced is an interesting and insightful discussion that is both very much of its time and also one that involves her thinking outside the box of conventionalities. It is not, nor was it intended to be, comfortable reading, and it challenges radical orthodoxies as well as mainstream ones. In doing so it adds considerably to understanding the final substantial political and intellectual project Schreiner was engaged in and how she saw the

relationship between men, women, violence, war and peace and the hoped for far, far future of humanity.

### Useful reading

Joyce Avrech Berkman. 1989. *The Healing Imagination of Olive Schreiner* Oxford: Plantin Publishers.

Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden. Eds, 2004. *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-textes*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Liz Stanley. 2002. *Imperialism, Labour and the New Woman: Olive Schreiner's Social Theory* Durham, UK, Sociologypress.

Liz Stanley. 2015. "The reader, the text and the editor" *English in Africa* 42:1, pp.59-76.

Liz Stanley and Andrea Salter. 2009. "'Her letters cut are generally nothing of interest' The heterotopic persona of Olive Schreiner and the alterity-persona of Cronwright-Schreiner" *English in Africa* 36, 2: pp.7-30.

William Kinderman and Joseph Jones, 2009. *Genetic Criticism and the Creative Process*. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer.

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